

REMARKS OF CONGRESSMAN HENRY A. WAXMAN
CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT
BEFORE THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS COMMITTEE OF LOS ANGELES
APRIL 12, 1986

THANK YOU FOR THIS HONOR. I APPRECIATE YOUR KIND WORDS TONIGHT AND THE ONGOING SUPPORT OF MECLA.

IT'S HARD IN THE MIDST OF SUCH FESTIVITIES TO FOCUS ON THE SERIOUS ISSUES THAT MAKE THESE FUNDRAISERS NECESSARY--ON DISCRIMINATION AND ON DISEASE. BUT THESE ARE PROBLEMS THAT HAVE BEEN WITH US FOR A LONG TIME, AND, WITH THE AIDS EPIDEMIC, THEY HAVE CONVERGED TO BE A TEST OF OUR WILL AND OUR HUMANITY.

AS DR. JUNE OSBORNE NOTED AT A RECENT MEETING AT THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, THE GREEK GODS COULD NOT HAVE CREATED A DRAMA THAT WOULD BE MORE TRAGIC AND MORE IRONIC THAN THIS DISEASE AT THIS TIME DURING THIS ADMINISTRATION.

* WE HAVE A NATION UNDER THE REIGN OF A BUDGET-SLASHING ADMINISTRATION AND UNDER SIEGE BY A BUDGET-BUSTING EPIDEMIC.

* WE HAVE AN ADMINISTRATION THAT FINDS IT DIFFICULT TO TELL HETEROSEXUALS ABOUT CONTRACEPTION THAT NOW MUST TELL HOMOSEXUALS ABOUT SAFE SEX.

* WE HAVE A PRESS CORPS THAT JUST FIVE YEARS AGO COULD NOT USE THE WORDS "GAY" OR "LOVER" THAT NOW IS FORCED TO EXPLAIN HOW BODILY FLUIDS ARE EXCHANGED.

* WE HAVE A LEGAL SYSTEM THAT STILL CANNOT FULLY RECOGNIZE SEXUAL PRIVACY AMONG ADULTS THAT NOW IS FORCED TO DEAL WITH LOVERS' POWERS OF ATTORNEY.

* AND GAY PEOPLE--ONCE WANTING ONLY FOR GOVERNMENT TO LEAVE THEM ALONE--NOW HAVE A REAL NEED FOR ASSISTANCE FROM GOVERNMENTS THAT THEY FEAR NOW MORE THAN EVER.

IT IS TRAGIC. IT IS IRONIC. AND THE EPIDEMIC HAS ONLY BEGUN.

WHEN THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH HELD ITS FIRST HEARING ON AIDS AT THE GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY SERVICES CENTER HERE, THE DISEASE HAD NO NAME AND THERE WERE 300 CASES.

TODAY THERE ARE ALMOST 20,000 REPORTED CASES, AND THAT NUMBER IS GROWING.

IF THE EPIDEMIC CONTINUES AT THIS RATE, BY AT THE END OF THE REAGAN PRESIDENCY, MORE AMERICANS WILL HAVE DIED OF AIDS THAN DIED IN VIET NAM.

I DON'T SAY THIS BECAUSE I THINK THAT YOU NEED TO BE MADE MORE AWARE OF THE EPIDEMIC. CLEARLY THE GAY COMMUNITY AND ITS FRIENDS HAVE DONE MORE TO EDUCATE THE NATION ABOUT AIDS THAN LOCAL, STATE, AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS, AND ORGANIZED MEDICINE--COMBINED.

BUT THE STATISTICAL COMPARISON IS USEFUL IN DESCRIBING THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES WE ALL FACE IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE IN THE WAR AGAINST AIDS.

THE LOSSES OF THE VIET NAM WAR DEEPLY CHANGED THIS COUNTRY AND THE WORLD. INTERNATIONAL POLITICS WERE RE-ALIGNED. DOMESTIC POLICY WAS RE-EXAMINED. PATRIOTISM, PARTY LOYALTY, AND CIVIL PROTEST WERE ALL RADICALLY RE-DEFINED.

I HOPE TO BE PROVEN WRONG, BUT I BELIEVE THAT IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS, AIDS WILL DEEPLY CHANGE THIS COUNTRY AS WELL. IF AIDS CLAIMS AS MANY AMERICAN LIVES AS PROJECTED AND COSTS THE COUNTRY THE BILLIONS IT APPEARS IT WILL, WE CAN EXPECT SERIOUS SOCIAL STRESS AND DIVISION. THERE WILL BE FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES IN THOSE INSTITUTIONS THAT MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICANS HAVE COME TO TAKE FOR GRANTED: MEDICAL CARE, INSURANCE, EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND--MOST OF ALL--PRIVACY.

MECLA MUST CONTINUE TO SET THE TONE AND PACE OF OUR RESPONSE TO THE EPIDEMIC. THIS ORGANIZATION HAS THE PRESTIGE AND CLOUT TO DO THE JOB.

FEAR AND HYSTERIA HAVE ALREADY BEGUN AMONG THE PUBLIC AND ITS REPRESENTATIVES. HAVING FINALLY UNDERSTOOD THAT THE DISEASE IS INCURABLE AND ESCALATING QUICKLY, MANY PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICERS HAVE BEGUN TO RESPOND WITH THEIR FIRST REFLEX--MAKE LISTS. HAVING FINALLY UNDERSTOOD THAT THE DISEASE IS NOT UNIQUE TO GAY MEN, MUCH OF THE PUBLIC HAS BECOME PANICKED ABOUT THE RISK OF GENERAL SPREAD.

WITH THIS SUDDEN LIFE BOAT MENTALITY, CIVIL LIBERTARIANS ARE TALKING ABOUT QUARANTINE AND OTHERWISE REASONABLE PEOPLE ARE WORRIED ABOUT THE SEXUAL ORIENTATION OF THEIR WAITER OR CHEF.

TO THOSE PEOPLE, MANY OF WHOM ARE IN GOOD FAITH FRIGHTENED, WE ARE OBLIGED TO PROVIDE BASIC EDUCATION. WE MUST FACE THE ONGOING DILEMMA OF HOW TO LOWER IRRATIONAL FEARS WHILE INCREASING THE LEGITIMATE SENSE OF URGENCY. WE MUST DESCRIBE A FATAL, INFECTIOUS DISEASE THAT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO CATCH.

WE MUST DEAL WITH THOSE IDEOLOGUES AND EVANGELISTS WHO HAVE ALWAYS HATED GAY MEN AND LESBIANS AND WHO ARE ARMING THEMSELVES WITH THE NEW RHETORICAL WEAPON OF AIDS. THE BUCHANAN'S AND BUCKLEY'S AND FALWELL'S ARE SOON GOING TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY A WAVE OF INSTANT PUBLIC HEALTH EXPERTS, MEDICAL MCCARTHYITES WHO ARE MAKING THEIR CAREERS THROUGH AIDS SCARE TACTICS. JUST THIS WEEK, TIM WESTMORELAND OF THE HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE STAFF PARTICIPATED IN A PROGRAM WITH OUR OWN CALIFORNIA CONGRESSMAN WILLIAM DANNEMEYER, AT WHICH MR. DANNEMEYER BROUGHT HIS NOW FAMILIAR MESSAGE ABOUT THE DANGERS OF COMING INTO CONTACT WITH PEOPLE WITH AIDS. WHILE SENDING OUT THIS CALL FOR PANIC, MR. DANNEMEYER SHOOK HANDS WITH AN AIDS PATIENT AND SAT NEXT TO HIM FOR THE TWO HOURS OF VIDEOTAPING AND DEBATING.

WE MUST BE PREPARED TO GIVE THESE CYNICAL PEOPLE THE SOUND THRASHING THEY DESERVE--IN BOTH THE MEDIA AND THE CONGRESS. WE MUST EXPOSE THEM AS AIDS TERRORISTS WHO WILL, FOR THEIR OWN POLITICAL ENDS, YELL "FIRE" IN A CROWDED THEATRE.

IN ADDITION TO SUCH BROAD POLITICAL ISSUES, THE PRACTICAL PROBLEMS OF AIDS CARE (BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE HOSPITALS), HEALTH AND LIFE INSURANCE, AND EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION WILL ALSO CONTINUE.

WE MUST BE PREPARED TO LOOK AT EACH OF THESE ISSUES WITH RATIONAL URGENCY AND WITH HUMANENESS. WE MUST ALSO BE PREPARED TO BE FIRM.

THE NEXT FEW YEARS WILL BE VERY, VERY HARD.

MECLA HAS A LONG HISTORY OF WORKING FOR A TIME WHEN ALL PEOPLE MIGHT BE FREE TO LIVE AND LOVE AS THEY CHOOSE. NOW IS A TIME WHEN YOU AS A GROUP ARE CALLED ON TO BE THE ADVOCATES OF THOSE WHO ARE ILL--GAY OR STRAIGHT--FOR THEIR DIGNITY, THEIR SAFETY, AND THEIR CARE.

YOU WILL BE NEEDED VERY MUCH IN THE NEXT YEARS.

I LOOK FORWARD TO WORKING WITH YOU.